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Colabora



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**Marcos Ramos, M. (Coord.) (2021). Joyas escogidas. Pequeñas (pero grandes) películas en español y en portugués. Madrid: Dykinson, 168 pp. ISBN: 978-84-1377-933-1.**

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## **Madonna’s Music Videos as Audiovisual “Performances”. Forty years of popular culture**

### **Los vídeos musicales de Madonna como *performances* audiovisuales. Cuarenta años de cultura popular**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

In recent years, the concept of “performance” has taken on an increasingly specific value in reference to issues of education, evaluation, and perception. It is a word recalling not only the performances we do, when necessary, but the entertainment world, where music and vision combine to generate sensational events and the magic of fiction. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, written by Guy Debord in 1967, the author claimed that the spectacle had become an “integral part of our very existence”. That was true at the time, and it is still true today. However, in the contemporary visual age we are hyper-and-radically-connected and we are transformed into “sounding images” projected onto screens without our interrelational human parts. Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone’s career began in the Early 80s and it has not ended yet. Over those forty years, Madonna has constructed an innovative “poetics of performance” that has been studied by numerous sociologists around the world.

**Key Words:** pedagogy, education, performativity, pop music, pop culture.



**RESUMEN**

En los últimos años, el concepto de *performance* ha adquirido un valor cada vez más específico en referencia a las cuestiones de educación, evaluación y percepción. Es una palabra que hace referencia no solo a las actuaciones que llevamos a cabo en caso necesario, sino también al mundo del espectáculo, donde la música y la visión se combinan para generar eventos sensoriales y la magia de la ficción. En *Society of the Spectacle*, escrito por Guy Debord en 1967, el autor afirmaba que el espectáculo se ha convertido en “parte integrante de nuestra propia existencia”: este hecho era cierto en su momento y lo sigue siendo hoy. Sin embargo, en la era visual contemporánea, estamos hiperconectados y transformados en “imágenes sonoras” proyectadas en nuestras pantallas, faltando nuestra parte humana-relacional. La carrera de Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone comenzó a principios de los años 80 del siglo XX y aún no ha terminado. Durante estos cuarenta años, Madonna ha construido una innovadora “poética de la *performance*”, estudiada por muchos sociólogos a nivel internacional.

**Palabras clave:** pedagogía, educación, performatividad, música pop, cultura pop.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

The case of Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone is very interesting, because her character does not indicate so much a musician, but a performer. Yet, since 1984, her name (which evokes a kind of “Satanic Madonna”, a blasphemous reference to the Mother of God) has been internationally associated with the world of pop music. Moreover, her music is as aesthetically pleasing as her image. Without her contrived and seductive image, Madonna would not be the phenomenon we all know. Her lucky star rose along with the birth of commercial music videos: indeed, Madonna was born firstly as a star of Music Videos, secondly as a performing artist. As Stramaglia wrote in his book *Love is Music* (2015), according to Domenico Liggeri, a music video is a “video-musical opera”, or better “a product created to be inextricably linked to music” (2007, p. 11). Linda Berton describes a music video as “a short work of film that translates a track of music into images”. In Gianni Sibilla’s definition, “music videos are a brief audio-visual text that represent a song in images. The song is used as the basis for producing a mini-story or non-narrative clip linked to the words, music or performer” (2005, pp. 276-277).

Madonna’s music videos are not merely commercial products. They are visual performances where the music functions as the soundtrack and the primary subject is Madonna’s body; a body that takes on the non-form of “liquidity” as described by Zygmunt Bauman starting in 2000. This paper analyses the music videos for some of Madonna’s most

successful songs, such as *Material Girl* (1984) and *Frozen* (1998)<sup>1</sup>, and *God Control* (2019), which is one of Madonna's latest singles. In the videos, we can see how Madonna may be considered the most influential pop icon/influencer of the postmodern age, or at least the first who marked the passage from "performativity" as a way of doing to a way of being.

Madonna's life story is important for understanding her need to gain visibility and become the star of the very long-running video that has been her life.

Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone nació el 16 de agosto de 1958 en Bay City, cerca de Detroit, en el estado de Michigan, conocido en toda América por la producción de automóviles. En el seno de su familia, de origen italiano, de la región de Abruzzo para ser más preciso, Madonna tuvo una niñez serena, por los menos hasta la edad de sus siete años. Desafortunadamente, en 1965, su madre murió a causa de un cáncer. Este episodio la marcó de forma indeleble, al perder así un mundo de ternura. No dejó de ser una niña, de jugar como todos los niños de su edad, pero conoció la amargura de la realidad. El padre se dio cuenta de que haber traído al mundo a cuatro niños, de entre ocho y cinco años no iba a ser tarea fácil para un hombre solo. Procuró, en la medida de lo posible, no privarles de nada, intentando que siguieran con sus intereses; permitió a todos ellos el estudio del piano y continuó pagando las lecciones de danza de Madonna. Sin embargo, a pesar de todas sus atenciones y preocupaciones, comprendía la falta y la importancia de la figura maternal. Así, y también por desear continuar con una vida afectiva interrumpida trágicamente, decidió casarse de nuevo. La nueva esposa era una mujer que conocía bien a la familia Ciccone, frecuentaba de vez en cuando su casa como colaboradora doméstica. Madonna sufrió el complejo de Cenicienta, experimentando la inadaptación a su nueva situación, que la hacía sentirse extraña frente a la madrastra. No la aceptaba totalmente, y muy temprano su indiferencia se convirtió en una actitud provocativa. Empezó a manifestar su instinto de rebeldía. Mientras más reproches recibía, más hacía para transgredir. Parecía querer oponerse siempre a la realidad, de la cual no había aceptado el curso de los acontecimientos. Al perder a la madre se sintió perdida, sin ninguna referencia. Ahora procuraba orientarse en una nueva dimensión, exhibiéndose casi con violencia, con fuerza, por miedo a no ser aceptada. Tenía necesidad de mucho cariño, de amor, pero el miedo y la inseguridad que brotaban de ella la tornaban agresiva. Estas son algunas de las motivaciones que contribuyeron a su gran éxito. Su inquietud interior se revelará muy fértil; el ansia, la inseguridad, se transformarán en su fuerza (Baroncini, 1987, p. 2).

From a pedagogical point of view, the story of Madonna is an example of the real possibility that everyone can overcome the "Cinderella Complex" and become "The Queen". As Michele Corsi wrote in 2003: "It is essential at this time (of suffering), to be able to love ourselves even more. And, drawing from this new strength and resource *to love our future*, which we want to be different from our recent and painful past [...] and *to start again*" (Corsi, 2003, p. 235).

<sup>1</sup> See also: <https://www.billboard.com/artist/madonna/>.

## 2. MADONNA'S LIQUIDITY

In “The Society of the Spectacle”, written by Guy Debord in 1967, the author wrote, “[...] the time of consumption of images in the narrow sense, and as the image of consumption of time in the broad sense. The time of image-consumption, the medium of all commodities, is inseparably the field where the instruments of the spectacle exert themselves fully, and their goal, the location and main form of all specific consumption [...]” (pp. 88-89). Madonna’s career began in the early 1980s on MTV. Her music videos were built around her personality.

Analizar a Madonna es profundizar en la evolución de muchos de los aspectos más relevantes de la sociedad de las últimas décadas. Su figura ha sido abordada desde diferentes perspectivas dentro de lo que se conoce como *Madonna Studies* y ha servido como caso de estudio para ilustrar desde procesos de articulación de identidades a estrategias de promoción y *marketing*. Y es que la carrera de Madonna está íntimamente ligada a la consolidación de la globalización, que podemos observar tanto en su relación con el canal MTV y el mundo de la publicidad como en la dimensión y alcance de sus giras. También fue paradigma de los postulados de la postmodernidad, creando un personaje ambiguo (a veces contradictorio) con recursos como la ironía, la parodia, la nostalgia y la cita, que derrumbaba modelos universales y rompía barreras entre la alta y la baja cultura (Viñuela, 2018, pp. 10-11).

Madonna has been the subject of academic study since 1992, and it should not be considered an outrageous one. For Daniel J. Levitins, “one person’s Mozart is another person’s Madonna” (2008, *back cover*). Furthermore, “Madonna is not a common artist, but a hypertrophic system of signs and symbols bound to the worlds of spectacle, art, music, cinema and fashion” (Stramaglia, 2015, p. 132).

A CD by Madonna is no longer just an item sold in a shop or a copy of somebody else’s CD. The CD is about me, and it enters a system of projective and affective meanings that belong to me alone. At the same time, a Madonna CD is about styles and commercial trends, it is about how someone else has the same CD, it is about shared (or induced) languages and values over generations and it can remind us of stories and contexts instituted by generational memories (Stramaglia, 2015, p. 129).

Madonna is a culturally relevant global performer because she is an icon (The Game of the Name). In the *Material Girl* video (1984), Madonna plays the role of Marilyn Monroe performing *Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friends*.

Madonna forged her image as a fashion icon with the *Material Girl* video. She portrayed herself as being as glamorous as Marilyn Monroe, but at the same time she is someone who values sincerity and modesty and not just wealth. Madonna is thus presented as a

genuine person and she resists being attached to a stereotype where she would be branded as self-centred and arrogant. The video opens with a conversation between two men. One of them is presumably Madonna's producer, while the other seems to be a wealthy man who would like to get romantically involved with Madonna. The second man tries to win Madonna over by showering her with gifts. But the video shows her on the phone with a friend complaining about a diamond necklace the man had bought for her. She then tries to offer the necklace to her friend on the phone, because she wants nothing to do with somebody who thinks they can buy her affection (Mason, undated).

As we know, "Madonna has been notably inspired by [...] Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Carmen Miranda, Judy Garland, Lana Turner, Marilyn Monroe [...] and Liza Minnelli" (Guilbert, 2002, p. 131). "Of course, the wannabes do try to look like her, but she – the original wannabe – never stops looking like other stars, including Monroe" (p. 113). Madonna is a "replicant". She is an image of images, mirror of mirrors, a "ubiquitous object" that "re-multiplies and re-changes and dissolves itself" (Macri, 2006, p. 79). "She is a dream of wholeness made up of small essences borrowed from a consolidated repertoire, excess, with plenty of accumulations" (Giliberti, 2002, pp. 58, 54, 55). "At the origin of Madonna's unprecedented success are her changing body and the underlying, yet very present, lust for eternity. That is united with her need for a mother (like Marilyn Monroe's need for a father), her personality structure, and her talent (otherwise she would not have had four decades of great success)" (Stramaglia, 2015, p. 141).

For those reasons, Madonna is not only an iconic performer, but also a liquid one. In the video *Frozen* (1998), she wears a "flowing black dress [...] that transforms her into a crow and a Doberman [...]" (Calefato, 1999, p. 113). The director of the video Chris Cunningham intended to de-materialize the hypostatized images of the pop star to create a visual effect of competing fluidity and statics. "The original script called for several statues of Madonna in the desert. And the performer would multiply while the statues were breaking apart and transforming into dogs. However, a sudden monsoon in the Mojave Desert north of Los Angeles destroyed the sculptures and equipment" (Berton, 2007, p. 280). That meant an alternative version of the video would go on to become the official one. However, the futurist exceptionality of the video attains the quality of an artistic performance when we see the detail of the liquid shadow withdrawing from Madonnas' henna tattooed hands. That is a (de)materialization or liquefaction (Bauman, 2000), of a dark archaic mythology that returns once and again in the music, videos, and live shows of the singer. This comes near to the divine and miraculous dimension of eternity. In this endless dimension everything should sooner or later happen and sooner or later be done. Now, a powerful eternity seems to have been compressed in the not eternal length of the human being" (Bauman, 2008, p. 62).

In the video *God Control* (2019), Madonna shows the massacre at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida in 2016. Pictures of three great feminists Simone de Beauvoir, Frida Kahlo, and Angela Davis can be seen hanging on a wall. According to Paolo Tancredi:

The singer doesn't deny the postmodern dispersion of rigid social codifications linked to sexuality, but rather she represents and bolsters it. The hyper realistic simulation of sexuality represents a distortion produced by the work of art. But, it ultimately enables an effective metaphorisation of cultural and political messages; such as overcoming a conservative, heterosexist and patriarchal vision of sexuality, femininity, gender roles, and the relationships between the sexes (1999, p. 132).

The media have always drawn on Madonna for sensational news, yet they have also been quite relentless in their criticism of her. From the outset, Madonna has caused trouble by challenging prevailing notions of properness in the United States and elsewhere. Her 1985 *Material Girl* video was criticized for encouraging materialism. Journalists clearly missed the video's irony. But, in any case, who are the media to moralize about materialism? Madonna's *Blond Ambition* tour was also censored in some cities. Evidently, the parodic spectacle of patriarchal male and female sexual icons were troublesome because they revealed latent contradictory tensions within mainstream American culture through sexuality. Her show breached too many fragile, middle class sexual codes and boundaries (Kaplan, 1993, p. 151).

Within a framework of reflexive modernization, the question of whether Madonna is a feminist is not the most relevant one to ask. Far more revealing is the mechanism by which reflexive messages of feminism and patriarchy, of traditionalism and post-tradition, are communicated through Madonna as a symbol. The point is that both continuation and discontinuation of social norms are expressed, thereby providing the self with points of reference for making meaning in one's personal life. In fact, messages about feminism and patriarchy communicated through Madonna may all be seen as observations on a modernist form of feminism in which the similarities between men and women are stressed, but which Madonna criticizes by presenting various alternatives (Van den Berg & Ter Hoeven, 2013, p. 149).

Madonna's performances have a political signification, for better or for worse.

### 3. MADONNA'S VIDEOS AS A SOCIAL FRAME

If we analyse the recurring ritual symbolism in Madonna's artistic production from an anthropological point of view, we find that her performances, and the cultural vector and social function of her audience, are all interrelated. In fact, time and again, we can see in her work what Victor Turner (1986) defines as social drama (p. 74), which is a conflict leading to radical change and transformation or leading towards reinforcing the previous *status quo*. That conflict, in any case, expresses symptoms of non-adaptation and the need for change. The origin of change can be found in social drama and works of art also emerge from it. Social drama has also been identified as a locus of great creativity where *the new* becomes manifest yet does not always assert itself.

Turner describes social dramas as "units of harmonic or disharmonic social processes, arising in conflict situations" (Turner, p. 74), dividing them in four main phases of public action. The first phase is a violation of traditional social rules, while during the second one



the crisis tends to widen. Between all the four phases a threshold or *limen* can be identified, as "it assumes its menacing posture within the forum itself and dares, as it were, the representatives of order to grapple with it" (Turner, p. 75). The fourth phase represents the "corrective" one, focused on problem solving and characterized by mediation, formal actions, or even the execution of public rituals. According to the author, this is the most crucial phase, because "It drains a distanced replication and critique of the events leading up to and composing the crisis" (Turner, p. 76). Finally, during the fourth phase, both the rebalancing of the destabilized social group and an irreparable break within it can occur:

Social drama is a kind of metatheatre. It is a dramaturgical language about the language of ordinary role playing and status maintenance which constitutes communication in the quotidian social process (Turner, p. 76).

Madonna's video storytelling seems to have a precise function, which is to frame a situation. It focuses on a sector of socio-cultural action in the general ongoing process of community life. According to Turner, this is "often a reflexive operation, since framing constrains the group to cut out a piece of itself in order to do an inspection and (retrospective) examination" (Turner, p. 139):

To do this it must create – by rules of exclusion and inclusion – a bordered space and a privileged time within which images and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be relived, scrutinized, assessed, revalued, and, if need be, remodelled and rearranged. There are many cultural modes of framing. Each of them is a direct or indirect way of commenting on the mainstream of social existence. Some use special vocabularies, others use the common speech [...] (Turner, p. 140).

In the symbolism of Madonna's videos, we can trace, on one hand, Freudian theories of art and the relationship between the artist and her subconscious. Sublimation and symbolisation constitute the artist's defence mechanisms in the face of a frustrating event or the need for immediate fulfilment (McGuire, 1974). According to Gay (1992) the arts evoke and contain the primary, preverbal and primordial self-experience. Artists use language to generate opportunities for non-verbal self-experiences. The novel and poetry, from this point of view, are like the clay or the marble chiseled by the sculptor. According to the author:

These self-experiences are unavailable to us because we lack the capacity to perceive our concrete, sensual experience. Lacking that awareness, we also lack the ability to perceive the organizing power of natural objects, a power that helps organize the self in return (Gay, p. 32).

On the other hand, the artist's ability to re-orient their impulses towards a creative and socially acceptable activity can also be found in ritual. Turner (1982) defines the changing times in which one does not belong either to a structure already acquired, or to one a person is expected to reach, as liminal. It is a time of loss of references and complete estrangement. It is a highly creative and unstructured *momentum* involving the decomposition of culture into its constituent factors and its free or playful re-composition into any and every possible configuration, however bizarre, which originates:

[...] a weird domain in the seclusion camp in which ordinary regularities of kinship, the residential settings, tribal law and custom are set aside, where the bizarre becomes the normal [...] through the loosening of connections between elements customarily bound together in certain combinations, their scrambling and recombining in monstrous, fantastic and unnatural situations (Turner, 1982, p. 42).

Furthermore, "liminal phenomena":

[...] tends to be collective, concerned with calendrical, biological, social-structural rhythms or with crises in social processes, whether these result from internal adjustments or external adaptations or remedial measures. Thus, they appear at what may be called natural breaks, or natural disjunctions of natural and social processes (Turner, p. 54).

In Madonna's videos, change, or a constant tension towards change, is shown through fluidity, which represents the passage from a social and cultural *status* to a new form and definition. The disruption or transition from one *status* to another as a retroactive transformative potential references symbolic and social structures. In the process of renewing themselves these structures acquire a collective value by revealing the social forces contained and hidden within them. Symbols are the main characters and guardians of tradition, social memory, and transformation. This does not only occur in a ritual process. Therefore, symbols produce action and performance. According to Richard Schechner (1984), the restoration of behaviour "is found in all kinds of performance, from shamanism, exorcism, and trance to ritual theatre and aesthetic theatre, from initiation rites to social dramas, and from psychoanalysis to the most recent therapies, such as psychodrama, transitional and primary analysis" (p. 214). The author underlines that "we all perform more than we realise" (2013, p. 34). Our daily habits and rituals are restored behaviours. We act like a director while repeating scenes from a movie: we rearrange and reconstruct our behaviour regardless of what originally prompted us to act in a certain way. The origin of our behaviour can also be unknown, forgotten, or distorted by myth and tradition. Nevertheless:

Restored behaviour is the key process for every kind of performing, in everyday life, in healing, in ritual, in play, and in the arts. Restored behaviour is "out there," separate from "me." To put it in personal terms, restored behaviour is "me behaving as if I were someone else" or "as I am told to" or "as I have learned". Even if I feel myself wholly to be myself, acting independently, the slightest investigation reveals that the units of behaviour that comprise "me" were not invented by "me". Or, quite the opposite, I may experience being "beside myself," "not myself" or "taken over", as in a trance. The fact that there are multiple "me's" in every person is not a sign of derangement, but the way things are (Schechner, pp. 34-35).

Madonna's performances do the same thing. They draw on past behaviour. They are organized sequences of events, scripts, known texts, and movements that "exist independently of the performers who perform them, so they can be preserved, transmitted, manipulated, and transform themselves" (Schechner, 1984, p. 215). Performative processes are dynamic ways of generating, acting, evaluating, repeating, and remembering. They can occur as an ordered sequence of training, workshops, rehearsals, warm-up, performance, although not all parts are present in every performance.

For example, in modern Western cultures drama is the domain of the playwright, who parses out dialogue to individual characters who resemble real people. In other cultures, the text of a play, though clearly indicating which words belong to which characters, is actually performed by several persons simultaneously, strongly calling into question the notion that a character is equivalent to a real individual person (Schechner, 2013, p. 261).

Every performance leaves its footprints, not only in the bodies of the artist and in the audience, but also in the culture and traditions of a society through a principle of inter-individual transition that fixes the restoration of behaviour in the sequences. For this reason, according to Schechner (1984), what makes changes in the performers could be classified as transformative. During a performance, performers (Madonna included) "are taken elsewhere, and once they have relaxed [...] they return to the everyday life from which they started" (pp. 185-186). They "play a character, fight demons, fall into a trance, travel in the sky, under the sea or on earth. They are transformed, capable of doing 'on stage' what is not ordinary and is forbidden to them elsewhere. Only when the performance is over, or even in the final stage, do they come back to their former identity" (Schechner, p. 186). From this point of view, Madonna is much more of a "replicant" and more "fluid" than other pop icons.

If performance processes can be understood as ten-part sequences, they can also be understood as complex relationships among four types of "players" – sourcers, producers, performers, and partakers. Sourcers write, research, or in other ways make or find the actions to be performed. Producers guide the shaping of the actions into something suitable for a performance. Performers enact the actions. Partakers receive

or interact with the actions. A single person may belong to more than one category. And a group may do sourcing, performing, producing, and partaking collectively. The possibilities are endless (Schechner, 2013, p. 262).

In a pedagogical and evolutionary perspective, Madonna's performances also take on a further and extremely important transformative function. In fact, like a child who plays and creates something new through objects that are already at hand, Madonna creates something new and previously unseen through the recovery of images, symbols and characters of the past that are also already given. Her performative action is transformative because it pushes the audience towards an effect of identification driven by subconscious impulses that stem from the experience of having been a child. In fact, according to Geert Hofstede (2010):

There is a powerful stabilizing force in this cycle that biologists call *homeostasis*. Parents tend to reproduce the education they received, whether they want to or not. And there is only a modest role for technology. The most salient learning in your tender years is all about the body and relationships with people. Uncoincidentally, these are also sources of intense taboos. Because they were acquired so early on in our lives, many of these values remain subconscious to those who hold them. Therefore, they cannot be discussed, nor can they be directly observed by outsiders. They can only be inferred from the way people act under various circumstances. If one asks people why they act as they do, they may say they just know or feel what the right thing to do is; their heart or conscience guides them (p. 11).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, from the perspective of the body, in the videos the performer's body "becomes accessible for others to see, judge and comment upon. The body itself can be understood as a project" (Hernwall, 2009, p. 177). The body-self presented in the videos is not just a gendered self that "reproduces the hetero-normative power structures of the (social) world. It also reflects the popular culture where the body surface has become a commodity to be used and appropriated from" (Hernwall, p. 177). Furthermore, according to Hernwall, what happens in our media saturated environment (2009, p. 190) can be:

[...] expressed as a postmodern intertextual identity. One aspect of that concerns the possibility of defining who you are or what you want to be by yourself. If the creation of identity is viewed as a process it means that in a society with a broader spectrum of experiences, with more influences, the possibilities for identity increase. And it is not just being someone that is a process. The process of construction can also be seen in relation to the body and, therefore, in the notion of how to *use* the body in the constructive and creative process. In other words, the body as a medium. In this process, we do not know what the results will be. What we know is that the contemporary media society mediates not just a range of expressions, but also values, demands and expectations (Hernwall, p. 191).

Therefore, Madonna's performing body can be seen as the quintessence of the contemporary visual era; like a living music video made with ever-changing sounds and images.

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